EPIPHANY SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*King Jesus* Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

To be perfectly accurate: *yesterday* was Epiphany. Yesterday was the 12th Day of Christmas, and the day the Church has traditionally celebrated the arrival of the Wise Men. I thought is was especially fortunate that Psalm 72 was suggested for Epiphany because of what this year is going to bring into all of our lives, and the lives of many people in other countries.

This is an election year in our country, but also in other places. So, it is appropriate that we should consider what Scripture proscribes as good and righteous leadership, and the way in which this was also revealed in Jesus the Christ.

The main idea of Epiphany is that with the appearance of the foreigners from the east, Jesus’ birth is no longer a *local* miracle*.* Indeed, as the Wise Men return to their own home countries and tell the story of their adventure in Bethlehem, God’s special revelation of love will become worldwide, even *universal* importance for *all* people.

And so, we hear Psalm 72 proclaimed because it reaches back into Israel’s past to describe the special qualities the people have yearned for in an earthly king for many centuries. Described in the lines of this psalm are the hopes and desires of people every where. They express the longing for a way of living together, of being led by example and decree, that produces peace within the country, that expresses generosity and compassion for all, and that is a shining example for the whole earth.

This, of course, is a large order and it must be noted that Israel did not have a great deal of good luck when it came to the kings they had. Think Ahab, Saul, and even Solomon whom we remember as a teacher of wisdom.

Unfortunately, although Solomon is still greatly esteemed for this, he is also remembered for being greatly influenced by the many foreign wives he brought into Israel and the way they turned his heart to the gods from their homelands. Alongside the many building projects, he accomplished for Israel, including the first Temple, Solomon is also remembered for his unfortunate building of religious sites to honor other, foreign gods.

While you and I may see this as a welcome nod to interfaith relationships, it might have been that for Solomon if he had stood firmly in his own faith. Unfortunately, Solomon did not only tolerate other gods. Solomon built places of worship to foreign gods, and he, too, worshiped them.

He did not remain faithful to God. Rather, he gave his heart and his faith to other gods. The justice and righteousness of the God of Israel was, through Solomon’s faithlessness, displaced from authority and power in his heart. As the king, his example would have had the same implications for the faithfulness and righteousness of the people. And indeed, it was not long after Solomon’s death that the kingdom split in two—Judah in the south, and the northern kingdom of Israel.

So, Psalm 72 lists the attributes of a truly good king—a king whose faithfulness to God will be in the way he is also an example of God’s love and righteousness. In verse 16, a portion of the psalm that was *not* proscribed for us, the psalmist sings of the prosperity and abundance a good king will also bring into the land:

*16 May there be abundance of grain in the land;
   may it wave on the tops of the mountains;
   may its fruit be like Lebanon;
and may people blossom in the cities
   like the grass of the field.*

This, of course, is to be expected. Rich harvests would be a sign of God’s approval of the king.

However, in most of the verses, the ones that were read for us, what we hear highlighted is the people’s longing for is a king who will receive *God’s* righteousness [v. 1]. Further, the righteousness the psalmist sings to God to give the king is defined as justice and compassion for *the poor*. And so, the psalmist sings a prayer that the king will be given the power to *“judge* [the] *people with righteousness, and* [the] *poor with justice”* in verse 2. Then again in verse 4, *“May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,* [and] *give deliverance to the needy…”*

Notice the number of times “the poor” and the marginalized are mentioned. As one commentator has noted, the psalmist lifts up what is known in Hebrew as *‘the “anawim,” that traditional triplet all throughout the Old Testament of the widow, the orphan, and the alien within your gates.’*

So, the long-desired king is *not* the warrior who will vanquish all other kings and kingdoms. The long-desired king will *not* be the one with the most impressive palace, nor the largest treasury.

The long-desired king will be the one whose reign, and whose heart, will be filled with compassion for the most vulnerable in the land. He will be the one whose generosity is such that even the small and powerless will be seen—they will not be ignored or forgotten. They will be seen and will have what they need to thrive.

Even more amazing: it is *this* kind of king—not the warrior with a sword and armor that brings world renown to Israel. Even more: it is a king who brings generosity and abundance to the whole of his people—and especially the poor and powerless—that cause foreign kings and dignitaries to come and bow before him.

What the psalmist recognizes is that all of these good things, all of these attributes that bless the people—*all* the people—will be the result of God’s endowing that king with justice and righteousness—with a goodness and integrity that can only come from above.

It will come from the king’s openness to Yahweh, to the God of all righteousness and justice, that will make the king great and worthy of other kings’ praise—not for:

how well he secured his own political and military power;

not for the splendor of his royal palace;

not for how well the economy was working for the top 1% of the populace.

A truly good and righteous king is one who follows God’s Law, which would be evident in how well treated and cared for were even the lowest of the low, the invisible people in the land. These are also the people whom God wants to bless through earthly leaders.

To quote the Rev. Scott Hoezee of the Reformed Church of America: *“It goes without saying that the King in question never arrived … until one night in Bethlehem when an infant got laid in a goat’s feed trough.”*

As I said earlier: Psalm 72 reaches into the ancient past to find the words to describe who Jesus was to the people of his own day. However, what is really important to you and me today is whether or not this is the same way in which we know Jesus and honor him in our lives.

Although many of our Christian brethren refer to him in the way this sermon is titled—as *King* Jesus—few of us here use that particular language. I suggest that it is because we are too weary of the failings of earthly kings—their desire for power and personal enrichment usually at the direct expense of the most vulnerable in the land, and even at the expense of the land itself; even at the expense of truthfulness and integrity. So, you and I do not use “kingly” language to describe Jesus.

In fact, the Christ the Magi found, and to whom they paid homage and then protected by avoiding Herod (another failed king in Israel), so that he would not know where to find him—for them Jesus is the embodiment of the righteousness and justice that kings, and all people should seek to have in their own lives, and in the character and lives of their leaders.

These are also the attributes that we are supposed to continue to seek in our lives and leaders here and now. This is what was revealed in Jesus. Jesus brought with him into the world God’s love and compassion, God’s shalom which is defined as “justice” and “righteousness.” Rather than in the halls of wealth and brute power, Jesus turns our attention to the people around us and the relationships we may have with them. Jesus turns us toward the powerful love of God that can heal and make people whole.

Later, in his public ministry, Jesus will codify this in his Sermon on the Mount. He will bless the meek, lift up the peacemakers, and those who weep and are low in spirit. In other words: he will see and bless those who are in need, the poorest materially and spiritually, he will bless them, and he will bless those who are humble, the ones who seek to bring healing and peace among people in conflict.

This is what Epiphany is all about. We sang about it a little earlier in worship this morning—the *Three Kings* of the Orient. This is what we remember and celebrate today—that in an ancient land, among the poor, and the lowly, there was a child who lived in a village and whose earthly parents were a carpenter and his wife.

One day, wealth and power came to their door. They had been looking for the child for several years. When they saw him, they recognized him. They saw the poverty and humbleness of his surroundings. They also saw God’s love revealed in him. And so, they did the only thing they could do. They rejoiced, they gave thanks, then they knelt down and worshipped him.

As for us: my hope is that we, too, will know the revelation that Jesus Christ is in the world—even and especially today.

On this first Sunday of 2024, a year that promises to be one in which we will be bombarded by all sorts of people and ideas about what is good and fair, I hope we will remember Psalm 72. Indeed, I hope and pray that when we look around us for guidance and leadership, we will look for those people and those proposals that will bring justice, public righteousness, and the care of the poorest and of the refugees and outcasts among us because when we do, God’s love will be revealed and made real among us.

So, come and let us welcome him, the kind of king the world has wanted for a long time. Come, King Jesus, that may we, through our lives, what Jesus revealed: God’s love, God’s shalom for all people. Amen.